



## The Devil's Own

A Romance of the Black Hawk War

By Randall Parrish

Author of "Contraband," "Shea of the Irish Brigade," "When Wilderness was King," etc.

Illustrated by Louis Meyer

## CHAPTER X.

## The Loss of Rene.

There was the echo of an oath, a harsh, cruel laugh, the crash of plinking, a strange, half-human cry of fright from the negro—that was all. The sudden violence of the blow must have hurled me high into the air, for I struck the water clear of both boats, and so far out in the stream that when I came again struggling to the surface I was in the full sweep of the current, against which I had to struggle desperately. In the brief second that intervened between Sam's shout of warning and the crash of the two boats I had seen almost nothing—only that black, menacing hulk, looming up between us and the shore, more like a shadow than a reality. Yet now, fighting to keep my head above water and not to be swept away, I was able to realize instantly what had occurred. I had been mistaken; Kirby had not fled down the river; instead he had craftily waited this chance to attack us at a disadvantage. Convinced that we would decide to make use of the rowboat, which he had left uninjured for that very purpose, and that we would venture forth just so soon as the night became dark enough, he had hidden the stolen craft in some covert along shore to await our coming. Then he sprang on us, as the tiger springs on its prey. He had calculated well, for the blunt prow of the speeding keelboat had struck us squarely, crushing in the sides of our frail craft and flinging me headlong.

What had been the fate of the others I could not for the moment determine. The darkness shadowed everything, the bulk of the keelboat alone appearing in the distance, and that shapelessly outlined. The craft bore no light, and had it not been for a voice speaking I doubt if I could have located even that. The rowboat could not be distinguished—it must have sunk, or else drifted away, a helpless wreck. The first sound my ears caught, echoing across the water, was an oath, and a question: "By—! a good job; do you see that fellow anywhere?"

"Naw," the response a mere growl. "He's a goner, I reckon; never knowed what hit him, jedgin' from the way he upended it."

"Well, then he isn't likely to bother us any more. Suppose he was the white man?"

"Sure he was; it was the nigger who was up ahead. We hit him, an' he dropped in 'tween their boats, an' went down like a stone. He never peeped but just once, when I first glimpsed the girl. I don't reckon as she was hurt at all; leastwise I never aimed for her hurt her none."

"Has she said anything?"

"Not a d—d twister; maybe she's fainted. I dunno, but that's her female do. What shall I do with the girl, Kirby?"

"Oh, hold on to her there awhile, long as she's quiet. I'm going to try the steam again, get outside into the big river. H—, man, but this hasn't been such a bad night's work."

The steam began to sizz, settling swiftly into a rhythmic chugging, as the revolving wheel began to churn up the water astern. Confident of being safely hidden by the darkness, I permitted the current to bear me downward, my muscles aching painfully from the struggle, and with no other thought in my mind except to keep well out of sight of the occupants of the boat. To be perceived by them and overtaken in the water meant certain death, while if they continued to believe that I had actually sunk beneath the surface, some future carelessness on their part might yield me an unexpected opportunity to serve Rene. The few words overheard had made sufficiently plain the situation. Poor Sam had already found freedom in death, crushed between the two colliding boats, but the girl had been grasped in time and hauled uninjured aboard the heavier craft. This had been the object of the attack—to gain possession of her. Very evidently I had not been seen closely enough to be recognized by Kirby. In a measure this afforded me a decided advantage, provided we ever encountered each other again—and I meant that we should. The account between us was not closed by this incident; far from it. There in that black water, struggling to keep afloat, while being swept restlessly out into the river, with no immediate object before me except to remain concealed by the veil of darkness, I resolved solemnly to myself that this affair should never end until it was ended right. In that moment of decision I cared not at all for Rene Beauchamp's drop of negro blood, nor for the fact that she was a slave in her master's hands. To my mind she was but a woman, a sweet, lovable, girlish woman, in the unrestrained power of a brute, and dependent alone on me for rescue. That was enough; I cared for nothing more.

With silent strokes I waited patiently until the steady chugging of the engine grew faint in the distance, and then finally ceased entirely. Uncertain which way to turn, and conscious of a strange lassitude, I made no struggle to reach land, but permitted myself to be borne downward in the grip of the water. Suddenly something drifted against my body, a black, ill-defined object, toss-

ing about on the swell of the waves, and instinctively I grasped at it, recognizing instantly the shell of our wrecked boat. It was all awash, a great hole stove in its side well forward, and so filled with water the added weight of my body would have sunk it instantly. Yet the thing remained buoyant enough to float, and I clung to its stern, thankful even for this slight help.

There was no occasion for fear, although I became aware that the sweep of the current was steadily bearing us farther out toward the center of the broad stream, and soon felt convinced that escape from my predicament would be impossible until after daylight. The struggle to keep afloat was no longer necessary, and my head sank in relief on the hands gripping at the boat's stern, while we floated silently on through the black mystery.

Suddenly the wrecked boat's bow grated against something immovable; then became fixed, the stern swinging slowly about, until it also caught, and I could feel the full volume of downpouring water against my body. The blindly floating boat had drifted upon a snag, seemingly the major portion of a tree, now held by some spit of sand. I struggled vainly in an attempt to release the grip which held us, but the force of the current had securely wedged the boat's bow beneath a limb, a bare leafless tangle, making all my efforts useless. I found a submerged branch on which to stand, gripped the boat desperately to prevent being swept away, and waited for the dawn.

It seemed a long while coming, and never did man gaze on a more dismal, ghastly scene than was revealed to me by those first gray gleams dimly showing in the far east. All about stretched utter desolation; wherever my eyes turned the vista was the same—a wide stretch of restless brown water surging and leaping past, bounded by low-lying shores, forlorn and deserted. How far I had aimlessly drifted downstream during the night was a mere matter of conjecture. I possessed no knowledge of where I was. Each bank of the river appeared about equally bare and desolate, entirely devoid of promise. However, I chose the west shore for my experiment, as the current seemed less strong in that direction, and was about to plunge in, determined to fight a way across, when my eyes suddenly detected a faint wreath of smoke curling up into the pale sky above a headland far to the southward. As I stared at this it became black and distinct, tossed about in the wind. I watched intently, clinging to my support, scarcely trusting my eyesight, while that first wisp deepened into a cloud, advancing slowly toward me. There was no longer doubt of what it was— unquestionably some steamer was pushing its course upstream. Even before my ears could detect the far-off chug of the engine the boat itself rounded the sharp point of the headland and came forth into full view, heading out toward the middle of the river in a search for deeper water.

It was an unusually large steambot for those days, a lower river packet, I guessed, with two funnels painted yellow and a high pilot house surmounted by a huge brazen eagle. At first, approaching me, bow on, I could perceive but little of its dimensions, nor gain clear view of the decks, but when it veered slightly these were revealed, and I had a glimpse of a few figures grouped forward, the great wheel astern splashing the water; and between, a long row of windows reflecting the glare of the early sun. Even as I gazed at this vision a flag crept up the slender staff at the bow and reaching the top flapped out in the crisp breeze. A moment later I deciphered the lettering across the white front of the pilot house—Adventurer of Memphis.

Indifferent at that moment as to where the approaching boat might be bound, or my reception on board; desirous only of immediate escape from my unfortunate predicament, I managed to remove my sodden coat and furiously wave it in the air as a signal. At first there was no response, no evidence that I had even been seen; then slowly, deliberately, the steamer changed its course and came straight up the river, struggling against the full strength of the current. I could see a man step from out the pilot house onto the upper forward deck, lean out over the rail and speak to the others below, pointing toward me across the water. A half-dozen grouped themselves at the bow, ready for action, their figures growing more sharply defined as the struggling craft approached. The man above stood shading his eyes with one hand and gesticulating with the other. Finally the sound of his voice reached me.

"Hey! you out there! If you can swim jump for it. I'm not going to run into that snag."

I measured the distance between us with my eye and leaped as far out as possible, striking out with lusty strokes. The swift current swung me about like a chip, and swept me downward in spite of every struggle. I was squarely abreast of the boat, already caught in her suction, and being drawn straight in toward her wheel, when the looped end of a flying noose struck my shoulder.

"Keep your head, lad!" roared out a hoarse voice. "Hang on now, an' we'll get yer."

It was such a rush, such a breathless, desperate struggle I can scarcely recall the details. All I really remember is that I gripped the rope and hung; was dragged under again and again; was flung against the steamer's side, seemingly losing all consciousness, yet dimly realizing that outstretched hands grasped me and lifted me up by main strength to the narrow footway, dropping me there in the pool of water oozing from my



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clothes. Someone spoke, lifting my head on his arm, in answer to a hail from above.

"Yes, he's all right, sir; just a bit groggy. What'll we do with him?"

"Bring him along up to Hulse's cabin and get him the old stuff in my room. You might warm him up with a drink first. You tend to it, Mapes."

The liquor I drank out of a bottle burnt like fire but brought me new strength, so that with Mapes' help I got to my feet and stared about at the group of faces surrounding us. There were those of typical river men, two negroes and three whites, ragged, dirty and disreputable. Mapes was a bushy bearded man about 40, I could perceive of his face was the eyes, yet these were intelligent, and I instantly picked him out as being the mate.

"How long yer all bin' roostin' or the snag?" he questioned, evidently somewhat amused. "Dern me, stranger, if I ever see the sort of thing done afore."

"I was caught there last night," I answered, unwilling to say more. "Boat got snagged in the dark and went down."

"Live around yere, I reckon?"

"No; just floating. Came down the Illinois. Where is this steamer bound?"

"H—I alone knows," dryly. "Yeller Banks furst, anyhow; we're loaded with supplies."

"Supplies! For Yellow Banks?" in surprise. "Why, what's going on there? My friend, there aren't too families within a hundred miles of that place."

Mapes laughed, his mouth opening like a red gash, exhibiting a row of yellow fangs.

"No, I reckon not; but that's a h—! or a lot o' fellers that what ain't families but kin eat. Didn't yer know, pardner, that's a right smart war on; that the Illinois militia is called out an' is a-marchin' now fer Yeller Banks? They're liable fer be that too afore ever this d—n scow makes it, if we have ter stop an' pick em come on, let's go up."

"Wait a minute. This is an Indian war? Black Hawk has broken loose?"

"Sure; raised particular h—! I heard down at St. Louis he'd killed 'bout a hundred whites, an' burned sum o' 'em—ther ol' devil."

"And where is he now?"

"Dunno; never was up in yer afore. We bin' runnin' 'tween St. Louis an' New Orleans, till the gov'ment took us. Maybe the captain kin tell yer sumwhar up Rock river, I reckon, wharver that is."

We climbed the steep steps to the upper deck, and were met at the head of the ladder by the captain, evidently desirous of looking me over. He was a solidly built individual, wearing white side whiskers and a bulbous nose, and confronted me not altogether pleasantly.

"All right, are you? Water pretty cold yet, I reckon. Been sticking on that snag long?"

"Several hours; but my boat was wrecked before we lodged there."

The captain laughed and winked aside at the mate.

"Seems to be a mighty populus river up this way, he, Mapes?" he remarked genially. "Castaways round every bend."

"What do you mean? Have you picked up others?"

"Certainly have. Hit a keelboat twenty miles below."

"A keelboat operated by steam?"

"Couldn't say as to that. Was it, Mapes? The craft had gone down when I got on deck. Had four aboard, but we got 'em all off an' stowed 'em back there in the texas. You better get along now and shuck those wet clothes."

The captain turned rather sharply away, and I was thrust through an open cabin door by the grasp of the mate before I could really sense the true meaning of this unexpected news. Mapes paused long enough to gruffly indicate a coarse suit of clothes draped over a stool, and was about to retire without further words when I recovered sufficiently from the shock to halt him with a question:

"I suppose you saw those people picked up from the keelboat?"

"Sure; helped pull 'em aboard."

A d—d queer combination, if you ask me; two nigger wenches, Joe Kirby an' a deputy sheriff from down St. Louie way."



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I was shivering with the cold, and lost no time shifting into the warm, dry clothing provided, spreading out my own soaked garments over the edge of the lower bunk, but careful first to remove my pocket of private papers, which, wrapped securely in oiled silk, were not even damp. Fate had played a strange trick, and I knew not how best to turn it to advantage. One thing only was clear: whatever was to be accomplished I would have to do it alone—nowhere could I turn for help. In the first place Kirby undoubtedly had the law with him, and besides was among friends—those who would naturally believe him and were loyal to the institution of slavery. The very fact that this was a Memphis boat we were on precluded any possibility that the crew would sympathize with a nigger-stealer. Nor could I anticipate any assistance from within out. Steamboats were few and far between on these northern waters, and at this time, if the report of war was true, everything afloat would be headed upstream, laden with troops and provisions. That the report was true I had no doubt. The probability of an outbreak was known before I left Fort Armstrong; the crisis had come earlier than expected, that was all.

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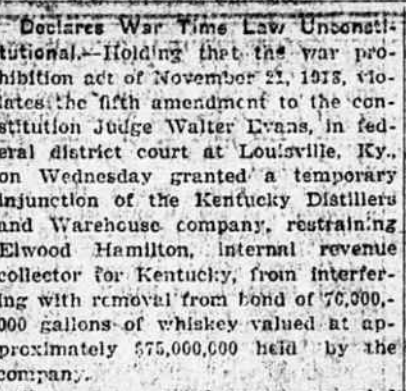
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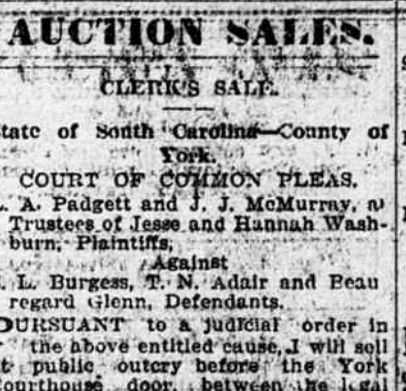
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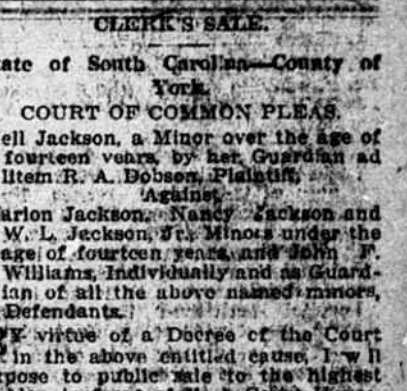
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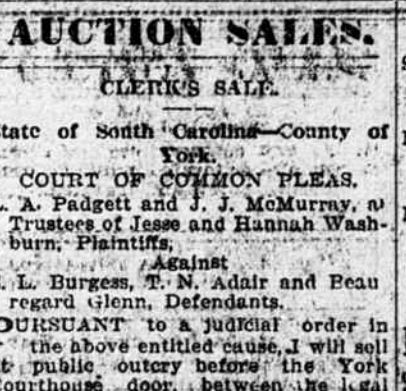
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